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Fatphobia and the importance of confronting our own stigma

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Leah Savage (<https://mainecampus.com/author/lsavage/>)

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In the wake of a year spent sitting around and doing nothing but thinking, I have been searching for new vices to tame my anxious mind and, to put it simply, new ways of thinking. Frankly, after a year of way too much time to myself, I am sick of my own tired thoughts. One of these newfound vices has been serial listening to podcasts on Spotify. This is what led me to the "Maintenance Phase" podcast and to discovering a topic that has impacted my entire life, one that I was practically raised on, but had really never taken the time to understand: fatphobia.

The "Maintenance Phase" is a podcast that debunks myths surrounding wellness, diet fads, health and fitness, and exposes marketing ploys that perpetuate these myths for their own benefit. The show covers American companies' long history of relying on consumers' insecurities for profit. On top of this podcast's demonstration of the corruption that comes hand and hand with a capitalist society, it also highlights the way that fat people are thought about and treated, and it gets pretty dark.

Fatphobia is a manifestation of weight stigma, which can be explained as the discrimination or stereotyping of someone on the basis of their weight or size. We all know that we don't want to be fat, and the reasons for this are typically related to appearance, but the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) explains that weight stigma goes far beyond concerns about appearance. Weight stigma appears almost everywhere; whether it be social media, housing and employment opportunities, health and wellness facilities or even healthcare settings, fat biases are alive and well. This is not to mention the nasty treatment that fat people receive in public settings, where people appear to believe that fat people don't deserve the same manners or respect as others.

Kitty Stryker, a writer for the Washington Post, explains that she receives remarks every day about her size; people tell her that she must be lazy and inactive because she is overweight, even though the writer says she exercises every day and keeps a pretty healthy diet. In one episode, Aubrey Gordon, one of the hosts and the self-proclaimed "fat lady about town," discusses her intense anxiety surrounding airplanes. It's partially because of the unreasonably small seats, but also because of all the ruthless comments that she receives from her fellow passengers. She says she often leaves a flight bruised and crying.

The grounds for these rude confrontations and feelings are typically defended with arguments about the health risks that are associated with obesity, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, osteoarthritis and so on. These are of course serious health risks and ones that should be avoided if possible, but it's really not anyone's place to make assumptions about an individual's health. Not to mention these split-second judgments can be dangerous and, like other implicit biases, don't typically account for the actual facts of an issue.

A 2017 study in the European Journal of Preventive Cardiology found that people with high body mass indexes, or BMIs, who had high levels of activity were at no increased risk of heart disease compared to active people with normal BMIs. Furthermore, a 2020 data analysis from Zhang et al. found that physical activity was a better predictor of reduced heart disease risk than BMI levels. Despite these findings, Virginia Sole-Smith writes for Scientific American that even research on obesity and health is clouded by fatphobia.

The ins and outs of fatphobia illuminate a larger issue: America's tendency to place blame and responsibility on individuals for a systemic problem. Of course, we all have the power to make efforts to be healthier and to approach others with more empathy, and these are things that will produce results in our own lives, but this is not the way to combat a national obesity epidemic. It's just like blaming an individual for the state of the planet because they contribute to climate change, or their role in ending gun violence or abolishing racism; there needs to be systemic action and empathy in order to make these changes happen on a large scale.

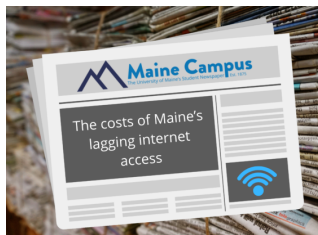


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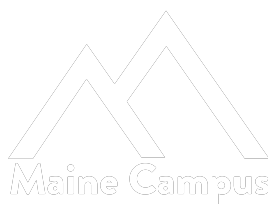
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